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SUBJECT: WOMEN'S RIGHTS GROUPS HOST PRESIDENTIAL FORUM ON
REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

¶1. Summary: Three women's rights groups hosted a political forum on reproductive health on August 2. Politicians and NGO leaders discussed contraceptive rights, women's social status, maternal mortality, health care, sex education, and prevention of sexually transmitted infections, specifically HIV/AIDS and HPV. Among key concerns raised were lack of public awareness and access to public health services, especially in rural and mainly indigenous areas. End summary.

¶2. NGOs Call for the Health and Development of Women (ISDM), Youth Network Incidejoven, and Network for the Reproductive Health of Indigenous Women, with USAID assistance, co-sponsored a political forum on reproductive health. Presidential, vice-presidential, and congressional candidates across the political spectrum participated. Alba Judith Cap Batz, from the Group for the Reproductive Health of Indigenous Women, gave a presentation underlying the importance of political dialogue on all aspects of reproductive health in Guatemala.

¶3. Cap Batz pointed out that there are various laws that address family planning and reproductive health, but that most of these laws have yet to be enforced. The poor quality of reproductive health in Guatemala, especially in indigenous areas, reflects a poor overall quality of health care. According to Cap Batz, the Guatemalan government spends less than one percent of its annual budget on health care, which is the lowest percentage of any country in Latin America. Of every 100,000 indigenous births in Guatemala, 219 end in maternal mortality, reflecting the inadequacy of health care services in rural areas. Twenty-eight percent of Guatemalan women of reproductive age expressed a desire to engage in family planning but were not able to do so. The average Guatemalan woman has 4.4 children, despite reportedly wanting to have only 3.4 children.

¶4. According to Cap Batz, sex education in the country is dismal. Forty-two percent of men and women in Guatemala are sexually active before they are 18 years old, despite knowing little to nothing about how to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. Every day, 25 Guatemalans are infected with HIV, and 9,000 people are expected to become infected this year. Cap Batz closed the presentation by evoking the human rights group's slogan, saying that Guatemalan women must stop passively accepting this situation with "eyes closed, mouths shut, and arms crossed."

¶5. Political Candidates, who were invited to speak for five minutes each, shared their concerns and plans to improve reproductive health. Oscar Rodolfo Casteada, presidential candidate for Partido de Avanzada Nacional(PAN), asserted the importance of reproductive health and expressed frustration that women's health programs in Guatemala have not improved over the years. He vowed to take a good look at the issue.

¶6. Miguel Angel Sandoval, presidential candidate for Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (UNRG-MAIZ) said that his party's plan of government includes a plan for women's rights and sexual rights. He also criticized Guatemala's historically

conservative government, blaming it for the lack of sex education and public awareness among most Guatemalans. He also criticized the double standard in Guatemalan society, in which men cheat on their spouses and infect them with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections.

¶17. Zury Rios-Montt, a congressional candidate for Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG), pledged to allocate Q36,000,000 (approximately USD 4.7 million) for reproductive health, including sex education, health services, and increased access to indigenous populations. She asserted that women are "the heart of the nation" and claimed that, although she is Catholic, she does not allow her personal morals to dictate her politics. She also denounced the recent exorbitant airport expenditure and other government spending on buildings and infrastructure, implying that these funds would be better spent on health care.

¶18. Pablo Werner-Ramirez, vice-presidential candidate for Democracia Cristiana Guatemalteca (DC), promised to keep politics out of his speech and to be frank. He complained that the current government was leaving the important issue of women's rights and health to NGOs. He recounted conversations he had had with the DC's expert on public health, who had convinced the party that this was an issue of great importance. Nineth Montenegro, a congressional candidate for Encuentro por Guatemala (EG), expressed the necessity for the government to begin spending more on health, saying that the government was still spending too little on reproductive health, especially toward indigenous populations.

¶19. Mariano Rayo, congressional candidate for Partido Unionista (PU), claimed that the municipalities that had elected his party were already spending more of their budgets on reproductive health and that PU's plan was to allocate more funds from the national budget to focus on the issue. He presented a number of plans, including educational reform explicitly mandating sexual education

for all K-12 students, promoting responsible fatherhood, and combatting corruption within medicinal companies. He also promised to focus on promoting cervical cancer prevention and improving medical insurance.

¶10. Romeo Menendez, chief of the health policy team for Partido Patriota (PP), said that reproductive health should be central to any health budget. He asserted that indigenous populations need culturally adapted services, including education and health services. He said that his party would consider access to emergency contraception to be a human right. He criticized Guatemala's patriarchic society that ignores women who do not choose to or are not able to have children. Citing a study that reported that, at any given time, 4 percent of Guatemalan women are pregnant, Menendez proposed sexual education programs in all primary and secondary schools to address the pregnancy issue and other issues of reproductive health.

¶11. Youth from the NGO Incidejoven, expressed their generation's need for sexual health services, while Consuelo Esquivel, of ISDM, noted that women understand the importance of these elections and that addressing these issues is vital for the development of a true democracy.

¶11. Comment: Reproductive rights is a very controversial issue in this predominantly Catholic country, many candidates tend to avoid the issue, and even those who attended the forum had little to say about how reproductive health fits into their specific policy platforms. Nonetheless, because women's rights, and especially indigenous women's rights, have been largely ignored for so much of the history of Guatemala, it is an important step that so many parties sent representatives to this forum. Conspicuously absent were representatives from Unidad Nacional de Esperanza (UNE), the party of presidential frontrunner Alvaro Colom, and Gran Alianza Nacional (GANAN), the party of third-place presidential candidate Alejandro Giamattei and of current president Oscar Berger. The NGOs that organized this event, with help from USAID, will be indispensable in raising public awareness and maintaining political focus on women's rights and reproductive health, especially at the national level. End comment.